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SPECIAL PROVIDENCE AND PRAYER.

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AND
PRAYER.

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TWICE within a very few months of the year 1871 public prayer was offered to Almighty God, in the hope that He would graciously listen to the supplications of His people, and avert from us great calamities which seemed likely to befall the nation. And twice, also, we offered to Him public thanksgivings, in the belief that our prayers had been accepted, and that it was by the special providence of God that we were preserved from the evils which we feared.

When the continuance of cold and wet weather late in the summer caused alarm lest the crops should not ripen, or should be spoiled at the season of harvest, prayer for fine weather was repeatedly offered in most of our places of worship. Fine weather came, the crops ripened fast and well, and were successfully

gathered in, so that we had nearly or quite an average harvest. Then we offered thanksgiving; and nearly all congregations throughout the country joined in thanking God for this great blessing. We believed that the atmosphere was subject to the will of God, and that He could direct such changes in its action as might seem good to Him, and should be for the benefit of us, His creatures, in the way either of mercy or of chastisement.

Again, when the Prince of Wales, the son of our beloved Queen, and heir to the throne, was afflicted with a severe disease, and known to be in great danger, there arose a universal desire to pray, and a universal anxiety, almost a demand, for the issue of a public form of prayer on his behalf. And never was an act performed more truly national than the offering of that prayer, or its equivalent, in all our worshipping assemblies on the Sunday for which it was appointed, and which was the most critical period of the Prince's illness.

The Prince recovered, and the solemn ser-

vice of thanksgiving in St. Paul's Cathedral, attended by the Prince himself and the Queen, truly represented the national feeling of gratitude to God, expression to which was given in a similar manner throughout the country. It was the general conviction that the life of the Prince had been preserved, and his health restored, in answer to prayer. We believed that the course of the disease, and the efficacy of medicine and skill for its successful treatment, were subject to the will of God, and that His will had been exercised for the relief and recovery of the royal sufferer.

It is very certain that, on both occasions, the belief in a Divine interposition, or, let us say, a Divine adjustment and regulation of the forces of nature in the atmosphere, or in the human frame, was not a mere popular notion, a traditional persuasion of the unthinking and uninformed multitude. On the contrary, those who most earnestly desired, and most fervently joined in the presentation of prayer and thanksgiving, and to whose influence the general demand for it was due,

were the great majority of the thoughtful, inquiring, and well-educated classes of our community. Such a belief, then, is consistent with a high state of intelligence, the wide diffusion of knowledge, and habits of observation and reflection.

But there are some who tell us that this belief is altogether irrational. They say that it is mere ignorance of the nature of things, and of the nature of God, which leads us to think it possible that any change can take place in the course of those events over which we have no immediate control, through the direct action of the will of God, or in consequence of any attention on His part to prayer offered by us. Their objection to the doctrine of special providence, or Divine intervention, on which, of course, the practice of prayer is founded, may be fairly stated as follows:—All events in the material world, that is, all movements and combinations of matter, and effects thence resulting, take place according to certain fixed laws. The phenomena, or visible effects, depend upon others immediately preceding them, and

these upon others, and so upwards in an interminable succession of causes. And whatever phenomena in the chain have occurred, no others than those which followed them could occur without a violation of the laws which regulate matter and motion. So that, taking any existing phenomena into account, those which shall follow are therein provided for, and must occur, in obedience to a natural ever-acting law. And if we suppose any will or action employed to prevent their occurrence, or to cause the occurrence of different events, this would be a miracle.

Thus Professor Tyndall stating, and very truly, that a warm southern wind gliding over the icy crest of a mountain "is as firmly ruled as the earth in its orbital revolution round the sun, and the fall of its vapour into clouds is as much a matter of necessity as the return of the seasons," draws hence the conclusion that "the dispersion of the slightest mist by the special volition of the Eternal would be as much a miracle as the rolling of a mighty river upwards over a

precipice." Science, he says, asserts "that without a disturbance of natural law quite as serious as the stoppage of an eclipse, or the rolling of the St. Lawrence up the falls of Niagara, no act of humiliation, individual or national, could call one shower from heaven, or deflect towards us a single beam of the sun."*

But in the statements, just cited, of objections to the doctrine of special providence, and in the instances just alleged, there is to be observed a confusion between the production of an effect by employment and arrangement of natural causes acting according to fixed laws, and the production of an effect by a mere will superseding natural causes, and acting contrary to fixed laws. At least, it will appear to most minds that a direction given to natural agencies so that they shall produce an effect different from that which would have been otherwise produced, but still due to the operation of fixed laws, is essentially different from the suspension of natural agencies, the annihila-

* "Fragments of Science," pp. 35, 39.

tion of them for the time being, and the production of an effect by no material or intermediate agency, but by will alone; an effect, too, not only independent of the operation of fixed laws, but in opposition to them, and in direct violation of them.

Reverting to the objectors' statement of the invariable succession of events depending upon the action of the forces of nature, it is important to notice the fact that it is within human observation and experience that the action of these forces is, in certain circumstances, capable of change in direction, and of modification in its results, without the occurrence of a miracle. Man, availing himself of the knowledge which he has acquired of the forces of nature, is able, in numberless instances, to regulate and control their action. He can only make them act according to the laws of matter and motion, but he makes them act in a manner in which they would not have acted, and produce results which they could not have produced, but for his intervention. Hence the saying of Lord Bacon, that "man obtains mastery

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over nature by obeying nature." The wind which would impel floating vessels in one direction only, and to one point or quarter, is made, by an arrangement of sails and rudder, to carry such vessels in several different directions, and to various points or quarters. The effect is the same as if the direction of the wind had in each instance been changed. A gas is released from the conditions and connection in which it is placed by nature, and, in the state of a separate substance, made to serve man's uses by supplying light to his streets and dwellings. Control is obtained over even so mighty a natural force as electricity, evolving its action, and directing its course, for purposes with which its unmodified operation and effects have no affinity. Torrents descending the side of a mountain diverge in all directions, devastating large tracts of land, and then, flowing over a plain, form a swamp, in which only reeds and rushes grow, and the exhalations from which produce pestilential disease, while, some miles off, there is a region almost destitute of water. Man, observing these effects of the properties

of a fluid, avails himself of the same properties to cause the same agent to produce quite opposite effects. He turns the torrent into one deep channel, reclaiming the devastated tracts, cuts an outlet for the stagnant waters, draining the swamp, and making the land productive and the locality healthy, and by an aqueduct conveys a portion of the water to the waterless region.

Now in these, and in innumerable parallel cases, results have been obtained by the employment of natural forces and agents, which those forces and agents would not have produced by a succession dependent solely upon the fixed laws regulating their action, and which they would have been incapable of producing, but for the intervention of an agency dissimilar to them in its character, and yet not *miraculously* or *supernaturally* directing and controlling their operation. That agency is a personal will—the human will, allied with knowledge and power, and directed towards a definite purpose or object.

If we believe in a Divine Being, having a

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personal will, associated, of course, with the attributes of unlimited knowledge and power, is it not conceivable that He, to accomplish a purpose in accordance with His will, may, without disturbance of the constitution and order of nature, adjust and arrange the action of forces, atmospheric, or of other kinds, in a manner similar to that in which such action is modified by man? If man can avail himself of the properties of matter, and the laws of motion, to produce innumerable effects due, for their actual occurrence, no less to his knowledge of those properties and laws, and his will and purpose in the employment of them, than to their existence and constitution, why may not God? Is it necessary that the exercise of Omnipotence should be restricted to such interventions as are purely miraculous and supernatural? that Almighty power should only act in opposition to the laws of nature? or that whatever action it exerts, although in accordance with, and by means of those laws, should be equivalent to a violation of them?

To put this statement into a somewhat

different form. Within certain limits man is able to effect changes in matter by various combinations, and to control the action of the forces of nature. Such power may be conceived as indefinitely extended, and as exercised by God, without reaching the supernatural, or, at least, the contra-natural or miraculous. We have to suppose an action on the part of God corresponding to those mechanical acts of man which are the medium between his knowledge of the properties of matter, and that combination and employment of them which is strictly in accordance with fixed laws, but which would not take place except for the intervention of his will and act. Such a Divine action may be superhuman because peculiar to Deity—to an immaterial being—and because impossible, except to an Almighty being: but it is no more contra-natural or miraculous than the knowledge by which it is directed. It is the medium by which the knowledge and will of Deity connect themselves with material substances, to arrange and employ them differently from what otherwise would be the case, but not in independence of the

fixed laws to which they are ordinarily subject. It is the action by which He puts in motion forces already existing and acting, but in a combination or a direction different from that which their previous action, uninterfered with, would determine.

Let us take the case which has been alleged, the passage of a warm body of air over a cold mountain top, and its necessary condensation into cloud, and hence a precipitation of rain in the valley. Doubtless, such being the condition of the atmosphere in the locality, rain will be produced. And if, such being its condition, there should be no cloud and no rain, owing to the special volition of the Deity, that volition would prevent them simply by miracle, by suspending or contravening the action of the laws of nature. But this state of things, it must be admitted, is liable to alteration otherwise than by miracle. The formation of cloud, and the descent of rain, do actually cease through the operation of causes equally natural with those which produced them. It is surely conceivable that a competent

power may arrange and regulate these causes, consisting of combinations or impulses of matter ; so that while the whole action shall be strictly according to the constitution and course of nature, the result shall be that which a personal will associated with this power has determined, and other than that which would occur if no such act of volition had been exercised. Man can force currents or blasts of air in the direction which he wills, and can evolve electrical action, by the employment of machinery. Is the existence of similar machinery necessary for the production of similar effects on a larger scale, and on the mass of the atmosphere? May there not be natural agencies which a superior will can direct, capable of producing such effects? And may not a Divine volition be the prime mover in setting in motion these agencies, acting upon them immediately, as the human will does in directing the corporeal movements of the man which are necessary to give an impulse to the machinery which he has constructed or employs?

Again, to take the case of sickness. A

disease has been produced by natural causes, and has run a certain course, one stage following another, in obedience to pathological laws which govern the human system, until a critical period is reached. A turn for better or worse may depend upon some intestinal action, to produce or prevent which an appropriate medicine is administered. Shall we say that the favourable or unfavourable operation of the medicine is determined by mere chance, or that, whatever the effect of it may be, or the state of the patient subsequent to its administration, any other effect or state would be a reversal and violation of natural law, and as great a miracle as the restoration of life to the dead? Or may we not reasonably believe that, two effects being possible, one, and not the other, has been determined with a view to a definite result by the action of a will as personal as that of the physician who has directed the administration of the medicine?

Or, let us make another supposition. A patient may be in such a state that his

recovery may depend upon the administration of medicine, or supply of food or stimulants, at certain times, or that a fatal termination to his disease may be induced by neglect of attention for a certain period. Now it would be equally natural that, in obedience to physical laws, a nurse charged with the care of the patient should fall asleep through fatigue, or that, in obedience to a mental law—sense of duty, or affection—she should overcome the tendency to sleep. Would the action of a personal will, determining the occurrence of the one or the other of these equally natural processes, with the result, on the one hand, of the death, or, on the other, of the recovery of the patient, be miraculous? Would either event so caused be as much a miracle as the recovery instead of the death of the patient by the intervention of the same will, if the nurse had administered a strong poison instead of the appropriate medicine? A human will might originate such an action upon the corporeal or mental system of the nurse as to produce, without a miracle, wakefulness or tendency to sleep. Would

it be impossible, without a miracle, for the Divine will to do the same?

It appears, then, that there is nothing unreasonable in the belief in special providence, meaning by that phrase the arrangement and control of events by the personal will of God acting by means of the qualities, forces, and laws existing in the material world. It does not imply a perpetuation and multiplication of miracles, superseding and contravening the course of nature, but only changes in the order and succession of events effected by the exercise of Divine knowledge and power, analogous to those produced by the will of man, and due to his possession of limited knowledge and power.

Let us next consider the connection between special providence and prayer. It is the general belief among Christians, and indeed among all who acknowledge the existence of a personal God, that the Almighty can and does, in perfect consistency with His Divine attributes, cause or prevent

the occurrence of events, within the limits already indicated, in answer to the prayers of men. As has been stated, the favourable change of weather in time for the harvest, and the recovery of the Prince of Wales, have been almost universally regarded as examples of the action of special providence in answer to prayer. It is, however, objected that it is unreasonable to suppose that God will act in consequence of human prayer otherwise than He would have acted if no prayer had been addressed to Him, and that His will can be altered so as to produce an effect which would not have been produced but for the prayer. Hence it is inferred that prayer is unnecessary and useless.

The objection implies that God has so ordered the course and succession of events in the material world, that no such action of natural forces, and no such physical effects as have been instanced, can be dependent upon the human will so as to happen or not according as that will has been exercised with regard to them. But such a proposition, to be reasonable and scientific, ought to be

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universal. It should be stated and proved that in no case whatever can the action of the forces of nature for the production of any physical effect be dependent upon the will of man. But, as has been shown, man has, to a very great, although limited, extent, a command over the forces of nature; he can combine and employ them to produce many a desired effect. In all such cases the action of these forces must depend upon human will. If that will is not exercised, the action and its effects do not occur.

And let it be observed that, in all such cases, man has not altered or controlled the will of God. These effects follow necessarily from the constitution of nature, when certain conditions exist; but they do not occur, nor do these conditions exist, necessarily, as a matter of fact. Something has happened, in accordance with laws impressed by God on nature, and therefore according to His will, which would not have happened but for the exercise of the will of man.

It may be said, indeed, that although

certain applications of natural agencies are made by the intervention of the will of man, and by it alone, this intervention is itself absolutely determined and compelled by an antecedent force, and is only a link in the iron chain of a fated and necessary succession of events. But the human consciousness supplies the refutation of this theory. Every man feels that he is as free to use his knowledge and power in employing the agencies of air, water, steam, and electricity, to accomplish his purposes, as he is to lift an object with his hand, or to walk across the room.

If, then, it is true of one order of events that they are dependent for their occurrence upon the will of man, and take effect through his direct action exerted according to his will, without disparagement to the omnipotence and unchangeableness of God, at least the probability is established that it may be true of another order of events that they also may be influenced by the will of man, so as to take effect in consequence of it, although they may be of such

a nature that he can exert no direct action to produce them, but their occurrence must depend upon the immediate action of God ; and this, too, it is reasonable to believe, without involving an encroachment upon omnipotence on the part of man, or the abdication of His sovereignty on the part of God. We have seen that the direct action of God may control natural agencies in the material world without being miraculous, that is, without amounting to a suspension or change of the laws of nature. All that we have to establish is the reasonableness of the belief that such action may be contingent upon the free exercise of the human will.

If we believe in a moral government of mankind, we must believe that the relation of man to external nature, that is, to the objects existing in the material world, and the forces at work in it, is part of his moral discipline. There are physical laws by the operation of which seed germinates, the soil nourishes, the plant grows, the fruit is matured. But man must be a fellow-worker with these laws, in order to avail himself of them

to his substantial and increasing advantage. He must prepare the soil, manure, sow, weed, protect the crop, gather in the harvest. He must exercise observation, reason, patience, hope, caution, self-denial. The product, therefore, is contingent upon the will and act of man. The physical law requires the intervention of a free, intelligent, moral agency, other than that of the Creator, not under the control of any law of matter or motion, in order that its beneficial results—results with a view to which we cannot doubt it was framed—may be secured. It depends also upon the will and act of an intelligent moral being whether the physical law shall or shall not have scope for action. Its full energies may be developed, or it may be impeded, thwarted, perverted in its operation, by the exercise of the same free independent will.

But there are other influences governed by physical laws, necessary for the designed effect, which are not, in the same manner as those already considered, available to man, so that he may employ them by his

direct action; influences also, prejudicial to the effect, or destructive of it, over which he has no direct control. These are atmospheric conditions, rain and sunshine, cold and heat, blights and storms. Analogy would lead us to suppose, and, indeed, observation and experience attest, that the operation of these influences is a part of the moral discipline under which man is placed. A part of man's trial may consist in the effect of atmospheric changes upon his works and the product of them, that is, upon his material interests, as well as in the conditions under which he is placed, that he may be enabled, by the exercise of his will and physical energies, to provide for the production of the crops which are necessary for his subsistence, or conducive to his comfort and gratification.

It is certain that such changes, by their results, apprehended or experienced, excite hope and fear, create disappointment or unexpected satisfaction, give occasion for patience, resignation, sympathy, and active benevolence, and in other ways affect the

moral nature of man. And it will be readily understood that it may be for the moral benefit of a community that one class or the other of such emotions and sentiments should be prevalent among them, and should prevail as the consequence of a dispensation of events obviously independent of direct human agency.

But if atmospheric changes are to be arranged at all so as to form a discipline suited to man's varying condition and character, they cannot be so adjusted by mere physical laws. That the variations in the condition and character and moral circumstances of men in a community may be met by any correction or discipline arising from atmospheric phenomena, these variations must be under the notice of an Intelligence possessed of power to set in motion the elemental forces which are to operate morally upon men. This Supreme Intelligence, which is God, will then act by means of physical laws, and so act in consequence of the notice He has taken of the state and conduct of men. It is, as we have seen,

reasonable to suppose that, on a suitable occasion, the Deity may interfere with the processes of nature by so directing—not suspending or superseding—the action of natural forces, as to produce effects which otherwise would not have been produced.

It is now shown, we submit, to be equally reasonable to suppose that an adequate occasion for such interference may be supplied by the condition and conduct of a community, by its moral state and need. But these circumstances of a community are the result of the action of beings possessed of freedom of will. Hence the interference of God with natural forces, or rather His special direction of them, may be occasioned by the operation of the will of man.

Human action, dependent upon human will, may thus indirectly and mediately originate Divine action, without intentionally or consciously procuring it. But it will make no difference in the possibility or probability of the case, if we suppose that the exercise of human will, and the ex-

hibition of human conduct, inducing the Divine action, should consist in the offering of prayer. If considerations of man's moral benefit influence the Divine will so as to affect the adjustment and arrangement of the natural forces which act for man's material benefit or injury, it may be an object of such an exercise of the Divine will and power to produce among men that state of mind and feeling, that moral condition, which finds its appropriate expression in the act of acknowledgment, humiliation, desire, hope, and trust, directed towards God, which we call "prayer." And to this moral state, it may well be conceived, certain definite and special action of the Deity, of the same character, may correspond, and be appropriate and consequent. The only difference between this case and the former is that, in the former, man pursues a line of conduct which influences, without his intending it, the action of Deity, and he is morally affected unconsciously by that action; in the latter case, being consciously affected by what he apprehends to be, and what really is, the action of Deity, he pursues intentionally a

line of conduct which, recognizing and responding to that action, is felt by him to be, and really is, of a nature to influence in its turn the Divine action for the further and fuller accomplishment of the object in view—the moral improvement of humanity by means of its relation to the material world.

To sum up and state briefly what has been said. If certain action of the Divine will, taking effect by means of natural forces, may be contingent upon the action of the human will producing certain moral conduct, and a certain moral state, why may not such Divine action be contingent upon the moral state and conduct involved in the offering of prayer? The expressed desire and hope of man that the special act of God may induce circumstances favourable to his interests does not diminish the probability of such intervention which is founded upon his moral state and necessities.

We have chiefly and almost entirely kept in view that exercise of Divine will and power which consists in the direction of

natural forces affecting human interests in the aggregate, or in communities of men. The same course of reasoning may be adopted with regard to individuals. By means, for example, of the properties and qualities of the components of the human frame, and of the substances which act upon it, the will of God may cause an access of disease, or effect a recovery; the disease occurring, or ceasing, by the Divine will, on account of considerations arising from a moral state or character which is altogether dependent upon the action of the individual human will. And so in respect of any kind of trial, affliction, or danger, certain circumstances may be induced by the immediate control exercised by God over various agencies, the proximate occasion for which circumstances may well be the moral state or action, actual or prospective, of the human being whom they affect. In all such instances, it must be admitted that if the Divine will may be influenced by considerations arising from free human action, it may be influenced by considerations arising from such action in the character of prayer.

It is not to be supposed that the regulation of the powers of nature by God is restricted to peculiar occasions, such as have been indicated. As governor of a world in which rational beings are morally as well as physically affected, for good or evil, by agencies constantly at work upon material substances, He, undoubtedly, not only has ordained, but adapts and arranges such agencies with a view to their bearing on man's physical and moral condition.

A large range of cases, however, may be conceived, some classes of which have been adverted to, in which the phenomena would be otherwise ordered but for occasion given by the action of the will of man. It is in these cases that the special appears to be distinguished from the ordinary providential action of God in His government of the material and moral world.

To take a signal instance from our history, as related by Lord Macaulay. When the armament of the Prince of Orange, afterwards William III., after experiencing adverse

weather, had set sail a second time from the coast of Holland, and the fleet of James II. lay in the mouth of the Thames, ready to intercept the invaders, the Dutch fleet, directing its course westward along the English Channel, was as singularly favoured as the opposing fleet was baffled by the changes of the wind. "The wind," says the historian, "had blown strong from the east while the prince wished to sail down the Channel, had turned to the south when he wished to enter Torbay, had sunk to a calm during the disembarkation, and, as soon as the disembarkation was completed, had risen to a storm, and had met the pursuers in the face" (chapter ix.).

It is reasonable to conceive that the changes in the direction of the wind were produced by Divine action, contingent upon the undertaking and prosecution of an enterprise for which God was pleased to design success. And we may entertain the opinion that the facts are thus to be accounted for, without believing, as the historian assumes that we must, that "the ordinary laws of nature were

suspended for the preservation of the liberty and religion of England." A difference in the direction or intensity of the atmospheric forces might surely be effected by competent wisdom and power, in a manner analogous to that in which human wisdom and power can occasion changes in the direction and intensity of other and similar natural forces, not only without any suspension of the laws by which they are regulated, but, on the contrary, entirely by the operation of those laws, directed by the only Being who possesses a perfect knowledge of their constitution and character.

If we believe that the human mind is free to create, by its direction of human action, circumstances leading to certain results, or to different and opposite results, through the operation of ordinary causes, moral and physical, we must admit that the Divine mind is equally free, by the intervention of the Divine power, and through natural agencies, to promote or prevent the occurrence of these results. But, in such cases, always assuming the human will to be

free, the exercise of the Divine will is contingent upon the exercise of the will of the finite being—a will exerted, this way or that, at some definite point of time. And as the will of man can freely create occasion for the employment of his own knowledge and power, as affecting natural agencies, so it can create occasion for God's employment of similar agencies, or of those which He only can set in motion, to effect a particular result. Thus, in the instance just alleged, we can hardly doubt that the free exercise of the will of James II. in various despotic acts, and especially in the publication of the celebrated Declaration of Indulgence, originated that series of events which culminated in the expedition of William of Orange, and the successful disembarkation of the army of deliverance in the harbour of Torbay. But for the exercise of the king's will, this series of events could not have taken place, and, but for the exercise of the Divine will, it might have terminated otherwise than it did. The actual result was really dependent upon a change in the weather; and it is no more inconsistent with the physical than

it is with the moral government of the world by God that this change should have been effected by His personal, immediate will.

We may also take, as an example, the late war between France and Prussia. Certain men were free to will or not the commencement of the war. Anyhow, its occurrence was dependent upon human will, single or combined. Man's will gave occasion for the employment of certain properties and agencies of matter which are under his control, for mischief and slaughter, and also for remedy and relief. And occasion was hereby created for the exercise of the Divine will in arranging circumstances that might conduce to or compel the continuance or cessation of the war. If we suppose any action at all of God in a providential administration of events bearing on the war, it certainly arose out of the will and action of man. And if, by such Divine action, circumstances were induced which brought about a termination of the war, this arrangement may be, with as much reason, referred

to some special exercise of the human will, as the whole providential action of God to the will of man in originating the war. Now prayer was, we know, extensively offered to God by the Christian Church in various lands, that He would cause the war to cease. There is nothing unreasonable in the belief that the determination of the will of God to such a course of intervention as led to this result was due to the regard with which it pleased Him to consider the human action of prayer, proceeding from the free human will, consciously directed towards the object thus to be accomplished.

The objection to the efficacy of prayer which is derived from the invariable succession of phenomena according to fixed laws, and from the inference that everything must occur, and does occur, by absolute necessity, and could not be otherwise, may be shown to be equally valid against the efficacy of human labour. If every effect and result is fixed by an unalterable necessity of succession, the intervention of man's labour must be unavailing or unne-

cessary. He cannot compass anything that he designs if it is not in the line of succession, and he need not trouble himself to act in the matter if it is. It may be said that his own action is part of this fated scheme of cause and effect, and that what is to be will be, as much through his instrumentality as that of the properties of matter which he has to employ, and the forces which he is to set in motion. In that case, his action with a view to a desired result, or his inaction, must be consciously to himself under an absolute external control, and he cannot act or abstain from acting as he pleases. But he knows and feels assured that he is free, and that his own will determines the interposition of his agency.

Man, by his labour, seeks to modify and change to a great extent an existing state and order of things. He does this in the cultivation of the soil, and by the application of the forces of nature to his purposes, as well as by the devices which he employs for protecting himself against their injurious or destructive action. He utilizes substances,

properties, and forces, which otherwise would be unproductive; and he renders innoxious, or even serviceable, others which would work him harm. In all that he thus does, there is a co-operation with nature. The effect is dependent upon the laws and action of natural forces, as well as upon the will and consequent action of man. Human labour does not alter the order of nature, because it produces certain results by means of nature which would not be produced without its intervention. "The natural course of things," says M. Ernest Naville, in his work on the Origin of Evil, "that is to say, the direct work of God, is incessantly modified by the labour of man. Shall we say that by our labour the designs of God are changed? No; for God, in creating us free agents, has made us partakers in His power, and wills us to be fellow-workers with Himself. Our labour, then, does not alter His designs, it accomplishes them. Man feels in himself that he has power to act: he acts; he sees the result of his action; and he cares not what the philosophers say who affirm that everything which happens is decreed to

happen by fate" (p. 299). No more alteration of the order of nature, or opposition to the will and action of God, can be ascribed to efficacious prayer than to efficacious labour. If man by labour can do that which would not have been done without or contrary to the will of God, so may he be reasonably supposed to procure by prayer a result which would not otherwise have taken place, but which takes place, not in opposition, but in subordination to the will of God. To use again the language of the same eminent writer: "Labour does not change the plans of God; it accomplishes them, since God has created us for labour. Prayer does not assume to change the plans of God; it accomplishes them, since God has created us with the necessity and instinct for prayer. Prayer and labour are subject to the same objections; but these objections are derived from the idea that there is no liberty either in man or in God, that the world is a fated and fixed mechanism. From this point of view, which is that of atheism, open or disguised, there is doubtless nothing for us to ask; but there is also nothing for us to do. The

doctrine of universal fatalism is so contrary to our immediate perception of reality, and to the consciousness of the human race, that we have good right to demand its proofs. However, these proofs never have been, and never will be given " (p. 301).

As an illustration, let us take the case in which, perhaps, more frequently than in any other both labour and prayer are resorted to for the purpose of securing the desired result, namely, the case of sickness. The sceptic as to the efficacy of prayer reasons thus: It is either the will of God that the patient shall recover, or that he shall die. If that he shall recover, prayer is superfluous; if that he shall die, prayer is unavailing. But the same alternatives may be proposed, with equal show of reason, in regard to labour employed for the benefit of the patient in nursing and administration of medicine. If it be the will of God that the patient shall recover, nursing and medicine are superfluous; if that he shall die, nursing and medicine are unavailing. It will be said that they are the observed appropriate means

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for effecting the object in view, the natural links in the chain by which one state of the patient is connected with another. But they are not necessary links in the chain following by fixed law the operation of foregoing physical forces, because the employment of them is absolutely dependent upon the human will. They may be applied or withheld, or used with different degrees of effectiveness, as some human mind or minds may determine. The result is, therefore, as far as it is affected by them, a contingency; it is dependent upon the exercise of a will. And why should it not be as dependent upon the human will exercised in prayer as upon the human will exercised in labour? Why not as dependent upon the will of God acting in consequence of prayer, as upon the will of God acting through freely employed human labour?

The same analogy also supplies an answer to the objection arising from the fact that prayer is often offered in vain, that what is asked is in many instances not granted, or what is deprecated is allowed to happen.

Why, then, it is demanded, should we pray, since we cannot be sure that prayer will be of any avail in influencing the will of God according to our desires? But labour is often employed, labour appropriate for effecting a certain object in view, and yet fails; the object is not gained, or an opposite result occurs. Yet this is not accepted as a sufficient proof that labour is useless. Men, knowing that their best conceived designs and their most strenuous efforts may fail, still continue to plan and labour, in the conviction that these are the means by which, according to the constitution of nature, they must expect, although they cannot be certain, to effect their purposes. And their very disappointments lead them, not unreasonably, to conclude that there is a will and a power that must be exercised as well as their own in order to success. In the language of the author already quoted, "These two harmonizing powers, labour and prayer, have the same condition, and the same limit. The condition common to both is perseverance. If prayer is a natural function of the spiritual life, it is a perpetual function.

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If prayer is the breath of the soul, it must be incessantly renewed. Perseverance, then, is the condition common to labour and prayer. As for the limit of these two powers, it is to be found in the designs, unfathomable by us, of the Supreme Power. How many prayers which do not receive a manifest and immediate answer! How many efforts which apparently fail to accomplish their end! Sovereign wisdom reserves to itself the determination both of the success of our efforts and the result of our prayers" (p. 304).

It has been stated as an objection to belief in the exercise of special providence, and in the efficacy of prayer, that this belief supposes the mind and will of the Deity to be perpetually occupied with matters of small importance. A similar objection is raised against special and successive acts of creation, by which new states or forms of being in the material world have been brought into existence. It is considered a disparagement to the dignity of Deity to represent Him as concerned with any arrangements in

providence or creation except those which are on the grandest and most extensive scale, or as acting at all except at the commencement of the series of events and formations which make up the history of the material and moral world.

But when we look into the question thus raised we see that it is the objector who forms a low, mean, unworthy, and altogether human notion of Deity. He attributes to God our scale and standard of great and small, important and trivial. And he implies that there are limits and degrees of Omnipotence and Omniscience. For he who thinks it too little a thing for God to take notice of the interests of an individual or a community, but a thing sufficiently grand and dignified for God to have in mind the affairs of empires, or the general interests of the whole human race, assumes that it is so in the estimation of God as well as in his own. But it is surely a more just and noble conception of the Divine Majesty to consider it independent of the comparative extent or vastness of the things with which Divine

will and action have to deal, to reduce all human and all created things to the same level in the sight of God, and to believe that the highest are to Him no higher than the lowest. On the principle of the objection which we are considering, it might be said that it is reasonable, and consistent with right ideas of the Divine Majesty, to suppose that Omnipotence and Omniscience were exerted to produce the wonders revealed by the telescope, but not those revealed by the microscope; that we may rationally and reverently believe that these attributes were necessary to the creation of immense systems of worlds, but that it is contrary to reason and to true reverence for Deity to suppose that they were directly employed in the formation of the wings and sting of a gnat. But who does not see that it is a much grander notion of Deity to conceive that it was no greater effort of Omnipotence and Omniscience to plan and create the whole universe of worlds, and to arrange their revolutions, than it was to devise and form the wings and sting of the insect, and that both these infinite attributes were as

necessary for the production of the insect as for the production of the systems of worlds, each act of creation being equally impossible to any but the one Almighty and All-wise Being, and each equally possible and easy to Him?

There is another objection to special providence and prayer, which also imposes a limit upon the Divine power and knowledge. It is founded upon the difficulty which our minds experience in apprehending the idea that the will and action of the Deity can be exercised in innumerable instances, and in innumerable places, at the same time. Hence the denial of any direct operation of the Divine mind or power in ordinary and particular cases, and the restriction of it to certain central or initiatory points of action.

But, in the first place, we have but to admit the existence of an Omnipotent and Omniscient Being, and this difficulty must vanish. If God be Omnipotent and Omniscient, He can act everywhere and in all cases at the same time. If He cannot, He is not

Omnipotent and Omniscient. In the second place, the exercise of the Divine will and power in two cases only, one here and the other at the Antipodes, simultaneously, creates as great a difficulty, and as great a demand for perfect and active Omnipotence, as its simultaneous exercise in millions of cases scattered over an area of millions of miles. If it be not incredible that God should perform acts of ordinary and special providence in several parts of the universe at once, it is not incredible that He should perform such acts continuously and simultaneously in all parts of the universe.

In fact, most of the difficulties which are made about the Divine action in special providence, and in answer to prayer, as well as about miracles, arise from inadequate conceptions of the infinite power, wisdom, and righteousness of God, or a practical disbelief in His existence as an independent personal Being. It is true that we, with our finite and limited intelligence, cannot form a just and adequate notion of attributes possessed in infinity, or of the nature of

Him who possesses them. But we are all capable of understanding as a matter of fact the personality of the Almighty and All-wise—that He is not identical with the aggregate of existences which we call the *Universe*, or the complication of substances, properties, and agencies which we call *nature*, or the observed order which we call *law*, or the tissue of energies and operations which we call *force*, or the supposed inflexible series of sequences which we call *fate*; that, on the contrary, none of these can be conceived of as having an origin, or constitution, without the exercise of a will and a corresponding act of power on the part of a personal Being. Corresponding to this fact, its complement and reflexion in ourselves, is our own possession of personality and consciousness of will, our certainty that we are not mere agencies or machinery, determined to this course or that by external forces over which we have (as separate and independent beings) no control. It is this co-existence of our individual personality with that of God, of our freedom of will with His, that necessitates our belief in His continuous superinten-

dence and direction of events, concurrently with our own action, and having a constant relation to ourselves. We are quite sure that He has absolute power to order all things according to His will, or He would not be God. But, if we had no other reason or evidence, the phenomena of moral evil, and the opposition of our own hearts to a perfect law of righteousness, prove to us the existence of will other than and differing from the will of God. Such will, of necessity, must be finite, having a commencement in time, that is, some period in the lifetime of the being who exercises it.

If, then, it be admitted that there is an action of the Supreme Will in regard to events actual or possible, in which we are interested, ordering and controlling them under that aspect, and an action of the human will, influenced by the occurrence or anticipation of such events, and tending to moral results, it is difficult to conceive of such contemporaneous actions of will without concluding that there must be some connexion between them, and that one

must be affected by the other. But as the human will is free, and begins to act at a certain definite point of time, it is that of the two which is the condition of the exercise of the other. And the exercise of the Divine will, so conditioned, is what we understand as special providence, or answer to prayer.

The purport of the preceding observations has been to show that the objections which have been raised against the theory and practice of prayer have no sufficient or real foundation. But our case will be imperfectly stated without reference to a few considerations, of a direct and positive character, which, even if we could not altogether remove difficulties, would, when weighed against them, turn the scale in favour of the reasonableness, efficacy, and obligation of prayer.

Communication, immediate and personal, between the spirit of man and God the Great Spirit must be acknowledged to be possible. Sentiments, aspirations, devout meditations, of which God is the object, are certainly

cognizable by Him. And if so, we cannot doubt but that they are reciprocated by the Divine Mind in action, of which the human beings from whom they proceed are, in turn, the object. This action must be considered as consisting at least in approbation, sympathy, and good-will. But it cannot be supposed to be restricted to the perceptions of Deity, so as to terminate in the Divine Mind. It must have some issue, some effect of a spiritual nature upon its object. For if not, then the human minds which are thus affected, and act thus towards God, are in the same condition and circumstances as if there were no God at all. If any spiritual benefits of which they are conscious, answering to such processes of thought, are attributable solely to their own reflex action, then these would be the same if the object of their contemplations had no real existence, and were the creature of their own imagination. It may be said, that we have no right to infer this, because no such spiritual feelings and actions would be possible to rational, moral, and spiritual beings if there were no God. Most certainly they would

not. And consequently such feelings and actions are one of the proofs of the existence of a God. But then they carry with them the further proof that He must be such a God as they necessarily imply—a personal Being, cognizant of, interested in, and responding to the spiritual wants and wishes of men.

Now this communion with God is the primary and essential element of prayer. Let it be once admitted that men may derive spiritual benefit immediately from Him by thus approaching Him, then such intercourse, with such results, settles the whole question of the reasonableness, efficacy, and necessity of prayer. If, in correspondence with human feelings and desires directed towards Himself He exercises an influence over human minds as the “God of the spirits of all flesh,” then equally may He be expected to reciprocate the same human action by exercising an influence, as the God of creation and providence, upon whatever is the subject of creative power or providential rule.

Man has been defined as "the worshipping animal." It is certain that there is in human nature an universal tendency to prayer. This tendency is a moral instinct, the elements of which are a sense of dependence and a sense of responsibility, both directed necessarily to a personal object, possessing and exercising will and power in regard to ourselves. Closely connected, indeed, identical in principle, with this, is the tendency or impulse to praise, particularly under the form of thanksgiving. On experiencing any great benefit or success, on deliverance from any great danger, especially if in either case unexpectedly, there is in every mind a consciousness of a feeling of gratitude, prompting in most instances an energetic utterance of thanks. This instinct of prayer and praise exists even in those whose notions of the Being who is the natural object of it are most obscure, confused, and erroneous. It exists, we will venture to say, even in those who profess to disbelieve a special providence or a personal God. Let one of this class find himself amidst the horrors of a threatened ship-

wreck, or lost, maimed, and in imminent danger of perishing amidst Alpine snows and precipices, and it is morally certain that he will pray. And should the storm cease, or himself be saved while others around him are destroyed; should relief arise in the waste, or a point of safety be discovered and attained, it is equally certain that, in the moment of assured deliverance, he will offer thanks. Even if it should be possible for him in such circumstances to act consistently with his professed unbelief, so as neither to pray in his danger nor to give thanks for his escape, it would be possible only by the exercise of a strong effort of will controlling his natural emotions. But the effort itself would bear witness to the existence and powerful operation of the instinct of prayer and praise. His philosophy and science, so-called, might succeed in overcoming his instinct, but it is doubtful whether he himself would feel perfect satisfaction in its success.

The cogency of this argument from human instinct may be illustrated by the miserable attempt to meet it, unworthy of a man of

science, lately made by an unbeliever in the efficacy of prayer. He compares with the instinct of prayer the instinct which impels animals to utter cries when in distress or danger. But there is nothing to prove that these are cries for help or deliverance. It is in the last degree improbable that they have any such character. They are of the same nature as the cries extorted from ourselves by actual suffering. Whereas, human prayer, in emotion or expression, is a definite supplication, consciously addressed, not to a fellow-creature, nor to a law of nature, nor to nothing, but to a personal Being. Similarly, the feeling and utterance of gratitude, in such cases as have been instanced, must have for its object a personal Being. No one can be grateful to an inanimate substance or an abstraction, to matter, or to force. The existence of the instinct of prayer and thankfulness, as a part of human nature, is a testimony to the existence of the object of this instinct—a personal God—and of His existence in that relation to the instinct—the relation of special providence—apart from which it has no meaning, and

would be a function purposeless and without a final cause.

A proposal has lately been made, anonymously, but under the introduction and with the approbation of Professor Tyndall, that, as a test of the efficacy of prayer, a hospital, or ward of a hospital, should be selected as the special subject of the prayers of all Christian people for four or five years, and that then the number of cures recorded in its books should be compared with those of other hospitals during the same time. It has been admitted by the proposer that the test must be imperfect unless such a hospital could be compared with some other, or others, for and by the inmates of which no prayer should be offered. A periodical which generally expresses the common sense and common feeling of the public, although professedly devoted only to its amusement, has remarked very justly upon this, that the only kind of prayerless hospital that can be imagined must be a veterinary hospital, since "none but brute beasts can be *trusted not to pray* in their extremity."

A word or two more on this proposal may not be out of place, as it has obtained considerable notoriety, and was offered, we cannot doubt, with a view to disparage and discourage faith in the efficacy of prayer. It evinces a lamentable misapprehension of the nature of prayer, of special providence, and of God. The author of it says that it is identical in character with invitations, such as are repeatedly given, to united prayer for the prosperity of Sunday schools, or the conversion of the heathen. And he affects to wonder that it is not as cordially accepted by religious people as those invitations are. But such united prayer is not offered with an object in view different from that which is expressed, nor with an understanding that if no marked success attends Sunday schools or missions within a given time it will be concluded that prayer for special objects is of no avail. If it were, none who have formed their conception of prayer and of God from the teaching of the Bible would expect it to be answered.

The proposal in question takes the form of

a challenge to the Christian world to test the reasonableness of their universal practice and belief in regard to prayer. But it is really a challenge to God to prove the reasonableness of the commands, and the truth of the promises, on the subject of prayer, undoubtedly contained in His Word. Compliance with it would be an act of irreverence and presumption of which no serious, earnest, religious person could be guilty. They would remember that a similar demand was repeatedly made of our Lord when upon earth by those who said, "Master, we would see a sign from Thee;" that He rejected the demand with indignation, and characterised in strong terms of reprobation the generation, or class, who offered it.* And they would reply to the proposal in the language addressed to him with whom this kind of challenge originated:

* "Then certain of the Scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee. But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas" (Matt. xii. 38, 39).

"It is written, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God."*

Another important consideration derived from the practice of mankind is the fact that not only do human beings, as a race, naturally pray in time of need, but the best and wisest of men in all generations and countries have been, as a class, believers in the efficacy of prayer. That the best men are men of prayer may be taken for granted; it will appear to most minds a matter of course, a mere truism; an exception, if it exists, must be regarded as a moral phenomenon both extraordinary and unnatural. But it is true also of the wisest. Let us instance in men of science. No names in history, certainly none in our time, can be compared with those of Kepler, Newton, Pascal, and Bacon for scientific knowledge,

* "Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down; for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee; and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God."

and for depth and comprehensiveness of intellect. And we know that they were all firm believers in special providence, and in the duty and value of prayer. It is not to be supposed that such men were unaware of the difficulties and objections urged, but by no means originated, by modern sciolists. On the contrary, Lord Bacon made such trials of faith a subject of prayer. The following is the conclusion of the Student's Prayer, composed by the father of natural science: "This also we humbly and earnestly beg, that human things may not prejudice such as are Divine; neither that from the unlocking of the gates of sense, and the kindling of a greater natural light, anything of incredulity, or intellectual night, may arise in our minds towards Divine mysteries. But rather, that by our mind thoroughly cleansed and purged from fancy and vanities, and yet subject and perfectly given up to the Divine oracles, there may be given unto faith the things that are faith's. Amen."

We must also take into account the evi-

dence afforded, by Christian literature from the earliest period, and notably that of later times and our own age, that prayer in innumerable instances has been answered. The experience and observation of thousands now living would confirm the fact. There can be no doubt but that, in the case of the incalculably vast majority of those who have been in the habit of offering prayer, blessings have so repeatedly followed the petitions of each individual of the number as to establish the conviction that they were their result and consequence. This conviction, so widespread and deep-rooted, cannot be neglected or despised in a truly philosophical inquiry into the value and effect of prayer. It cannot be accounted for by a mathematical theory of so many concurrences happening in so many trials, or by a psychological theory of credulity and delusion. After making every deduction that can be demanded on the ground of merely accidental coincidence, or of ignorance and fanaticism, there remains the testimony of multitudes of intelligent, practical, well-informed persons to the fact of a connexion between their

prayers and subsequent events, and to their assured belief that it has been a connexion of cause and effect. The acknowledgment made by so many and such witnesses, and by each repeatedly, in the language of the Psalmist, "Verily God hath heard me; He hath attended to the voice of my prayer," will suffice to counterbalance in most minds the reasoning which has brought some to the conclusion that the same things have happened in all cases as if there had been no prayer, and as if there were no God.

It must be added that in the Bible throughout—in the Old Testament and in the New—we are taught, by examples, invitations, commands, and promises innumerable, the duty and benefits of prayer. Hence, denial of the reasonableness and efficacy of prayer is necessarily equivalent to a denial of the inspiration and truth of the Bible.

In conclusion, let it be considered that provision is made against the difficulties

which exist on this subject, as well as many others which have to do with the relations between God and man, in the manifestation of Deity to us by the incarnation, and in the person, of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is in itself indeed a great mystery, but when received and apprehended in all the fulness of its reality it solves other mysteries. And it may be so received and apprehended, because it is a matter of plain historic fact, capable of being proved to be such on the ordinary grounds and principles of evidence and testimony. If we believe the narrative of the Gospels, we believe in One who, being found in fashion as a man, and identifying Himself with humanity in all its interests, general and particular, possessed absolute and inherent dominion over all the substances and forces of the material world. On the same authority, and, indeed, as an immediate inference from His independent possession of such dominion, we acknowledge Him to be the Creator of all things, the Infinite and Eternal God. Herein, then, we have a firm foundation for our belief in God's providential government of the world, both ordinary

and special. God is, in Christ, Lord and Ruler of all things. And the knowledge we have of Christ, through the revelation of His word, gives us the assurance that He can and will take cognizance of circumstances and events affecting us, whether arising out of the operation of natural law, or originating in our own conduct and action, or that of others; and that He will order and arrange them with a view to certain results which, without such actual and personal interposition, would not happen. This providential action, continuous, ordinary, and special, is implied in His parting assurance, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth;" "all power" meaning all authority in administration exercised at will. And the fact that His personal active interest in human affairs is the exemplification of and identical with that of the Deity from the beginning, was declared by Him when He said, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work."

It is true that Christ exerted His power over nature miraculously, that is, in independence of its known and permanent laws,

while what we are contending for is an exercise of power in accordance with such laws, in the direction and management of the properties of material things which are subject to them, appropriate to certain cases and circumstances as they arise. It was necessary to the proof of His Divine mission, and of His being whatever He claimed to be, that He should work miracles. And this was the primary object of them. But the miraculous exercise of His power over nature was also necessary to the proof of His general and ordinary possession of that power. In no other way could the fact of His possession of it be satisfactorily established. The greater includes the less. If His will and word be in themselves law, which all things in nature must obey, His will and word can set in motion the forces of nature towards a designed end to which they are appropriate, within the limits of those subordinate laws under which they ordinarily act. Besides, under this aspect there is a conspicuous relation of the examples of His supernatural exercise of power to the departments of His providential action. In the

most numerous class of his miracles, the cure of diseases, a pledge is given that this vast range of "ills that flesh is heir to" is under His notice, and subject to His control, not generally or in the aggregate only, but in the individual cases of their occurrence. Also, in the great variety of attendant circumstances, and of the methods employed by Him, is felt in the apprehension and consciousness of thousands to be an indication of His attention to specialities, and of His willingness and power to bless the use of means. His creative multiplication of materials of food designates Him as the author and provider of the means of our subsistence, the giver of our daily bread, the Being to whose government of the seasons it is due that our "land yieldeth her increase." By His command over the elements evidenced in stilling the storms on the Lake of Galilee, He is presented to us as the constant Ruler of the powers of nature, habitually directing their operation, and guiding it to such issues as all and each of the human interests affected by it may seem to His Divine wisdom to require. In the resuscita-

tion of the dead, and His own resurrection, is involved the fact of His sovereignty over life and death, His determination of the period for each one's removal into the eternal world, and His personal admission of those who are His to the blessedness of His presence. Thus He exemplified in the resurrection of Lazarus the universal truth then enunciated by Him concerning Himself, "I am the resurrection and the life." And with regard to His own resurrection, He testifies, "I am He that liveth and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell (the invisible world) and of death."

And the revelation of the Gospels affords as much aid to the mind in the matter of prayer, and answer to prayer, as in that of special providence. The Lord Jesus Christ, when on earth, was accessible to those who were in want, or suffering, or sorrow, and exercised unlimited free-will, as well as unlimited authority, in receiving and granting the petitions addressed to Him. To those who witnessed the grace and power which

dwelt in Him, no considerations of the unalterable determination of all events by Divine decrees, or fixed laws of nature, could reasonably avail to convince them that application to Him for the attainment of a desired result was superfluous if the thing was ordained or in sequence to be, and useless if it was not. All difficulty of a speculative nature, if it had been suggested or entertained, would have vanished in the presence of One who, it was evident, could deal with all substances and all forces in nature, as man deals with those over which he can exercise control. It is a matter of fact, according to the testimony of the Gospel history and of Christianity from the beginning, that there was such a Being. It is equally so, on the same testimony, that He now exists. Also that He is Himself the Author of nature, the Omnipotent and Omniscient One, to whose will and act the beginning and the course of the whole order of the universe, in every part of it, are due.

Here, then, is the practical and satisfactory solution of the mystery with which specula-

tions on the attributes of God and of nature surround the subject of prayer and answers to prayer. Christ is God. Universal nature is subject to Him ; “all things in heaven and in earth.” He has a will like our own, and has perfect power to act according to His will. He chooses to act through existing means, properties, and agencies. By them His will is accomplished as surely and completely, as if He acted without them, that is, miraculously. He is the God of Providence, and, as such, is the proper object of prayer ; and everything that concerns every man is properly and reasonably an occasion and a subject of prayer.







